DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 175 275 FL 010 572

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TITLE Language Variation, Politeness and Bilingual Children.
PUB DATE 9 Apr 79
NOTE 20p.: Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Symposium on New Perspectives on Research with Linguistically and Culturally Different Children (April 9, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Bilingualism; Bilingual Students; Code Switching (Language); Cultural Factors; Discourse Analysis; Elementary School Students; *English (Second Language); Junior High School Students; Language Research; Language Styles; *Language Usage; *Language Variation; Native Speakers; Pretend Play; Puerto Ricans; *Second Language Learning; Spanish Speaking
IDENTIFIERS Armenians; *Politeness; *Request Strategies

ABSTRACT

Three similar experiments were conducted to assess language variation and politeness in the speech of English monolingual and Spanish-English bilingual children, and in Armenian children learning English as a second language. Each experiment elicited request strategies from the children with the use of puppets in a structured conversation. While the overall trend of the studies showed greater variation ability among native speakers than among second language learners, the difference was statistically significant only between the performance in Spanish and English of native Spanish speakers. Armenians were found to exhibit a significantly lower degree of politeness than other subjects, possibly because of cultural factors. When Spanish-speaking subjects were divided into balanced and non-balanced bilinguals, the balanced group was found to exhibit greater variation and politeness than the non-balanced group. Possible interpretations of these findings are discussed, and a brief bibliography is appended. (JB)

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Language Variation, Politeness and Bilingual Children

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FL010572

Paper presented at AERA Symposium on New Perspectives on Research with Linguistically and Culturally Different Children, April 9, 1979.

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A unique feature of human language is the capacity for variation. No other species (e.g., birds, bees, chimpanzees) has demonstrated this capacity either in its natural communication system or in one in which it has been instructed. It is well-accepted that bees have the capacity to generate an infinite variety of distinct messages (based on their position on the wall of the hive and the speed of their dance). Nevertheless, no two messages produced by bees ever carry the same meaning. Each message has a unique meaning with the intent to designate a particular point in space. There is no room for stylistic variation. There is no distinction between literal and non-literal meaning. In spite of the infinite generative capacity, then, variation exhibits no importance in the communicative system of bees. Other species, while they have been reported to demonstrate some of the creative aspects of language, have not been shown to embody the capacity for variation, which exists in human language.

It is this capacity for variation (linguistically, functionally and contextually) that serves as the point of departure for this paper. Moreover, it is a feature of language which is compounded in bilingual populations. Bilinguals have both the capacity to and, through empirical verification, have demonstrated the ability to vary the code they are using and the styles of each individual code in a functionally and contextually-appropriate manner.

In the interests of universals language variation has tended to be ignored in the language acquisition literature. The structural and stylistic variation of caretakers may yet offer a clue about the environmental trigger Chomsky (1965) proposed for the innate capacity of children to acquire languages. Variation may also (or alternatively) represent the stimulus

second language learners need to make the different between native-like fluency and an adequate degree of biculturalism on the one hand or pidginized and fossilized forms on the other. Before some of these questions can be addressed, however, it is necessary to investigate the extent to which bilingual children are able to vary structural and functional aspects of their language.

The research described in this paper examines the ability of bilingual and monolingual children in linguistic and functional variation. Most research in the field of language variation has focused on phonological variants and their sociolinguistic correlates (Labov, 1969). The work described below departs from this tradition in two important ways. First, the linguistic variation of interest is the set of semantic request strategies (e.g., can, could, do, will, imperative among others) a speaker produces. Second, the research centers on linguistic and functional variation as a measure of language ability. Request strategies have been selected for this investigation for several reasons. The breadth of variation (more than 20 semantic strategies for requesting have been identified in English and in Spanish) militates in favor of a greater ability on the part of children to control many strategies. Request strategies have already been researched from a wide variety of perspectives (Ervin-Tripp, 1976; Green, 1975; Searle, 1969; Shatz and Gelman, 1973) and, thus, provide a substantial data-based for comparative purposes. Finally, the notion of a request is grounded in functional aspects of language. Therefore, both structural and functional abilities can be investigated at the same time.

Since functional approaches to the study of language represent a diverse and sometimes contradictory set of assumptions, it is important to define the

functional approach taken in this research. Clearly a request is functional in the sense that it intends to accomplish something or bring about a change in the status quo. This is how a request functions for the speaker of an utterance. A request also has consequences for the listener. Those consequences may move the listener to act or may have no observable effect. One important effect which a request has on any listener concerns the politeness with which s/he perceives that request. It is the latter sense (i.e., the effect of requests on the listener) that makes this approach functional. In terms of Austin's (1962) tripartite distinction among locutionary acts, illocutionary acts, and perlocutionary effects, the perlocutionary effects on the listener are those of greatest interest in the functional aspects of this work.

The specific linguistic variation ability investigated in this study focused on the number of distinct request strategies a bilingual child could produce in a role-playing situation talking to puppets. Functional variation was defined by the politeness each request conveyed. Both linguistic variation and functional variation fall short in one important way. These measures, while they may provide better indicators of language ability than commercial instruments, do not address the issues of contextual variation or appropriateness in oral production. Leaving those problems for future research, the following questions were posed:

1) Do Armenian speakers of English (L2) vary their request strategies as much as native English (L1) speakers of a comparible age?
2) Do Puerto Rican bilingual children vary their request strategies in English (L2) as much as they do in Spanish (L1)?

3) Do young ESL learners (L2) vary their request strategies in English to the same extent as middle class (L1) and working class (L1) native speakers of the same age?

4) To what extent do Armenian and American children reflect the same amount of politeness in their request strategies?

5) How does the politeness of working class and middle class children compare with each other and with that of second language learners of the same age?

METHOD

Subjects

Three comparable experiments were conducted involving a total of six groups of subjects. In the first experiment there were ten Armenian children who spoke English as a second language and ten native English-speaking children. The ages of the Armenian children ranged from 12;2 to 15;6 with a mean of 13;10. The Americans' ages ranged from 12;7 to 14;11 with a mean of 13;4. Each of the two groups was equally divided between males and females.

The second experiment involved thirty-two children of Hispanic origin. Their ages ranged from 7;7 to 11;4 with a mean of 9;6. Of the 32 children, 29 were of Puerto Rican origin and 3 represented other Latino groups. All were enrolled in a U.S. Title VII Bilingual program at the time of the study. Half of this group was male and half was female.

Twenty-four children participated in the third experiment. Eight were middle class American children, eight were working class and eight were second

language learners from different language backgrounds. All were enrolled in grades one or two of the same school in a midwestern university community. The ages of the middle class group ranged from 7;6 to 8;1 with a mean of 7;10. The working class children were between 6;0 and 8;9 with a mean of 7;1. The second language learners range from 7;2 to 9;7 with a mean of 8;1. All were enrolled in a school with a state-funded multicultural program where a great deal of contact existed between English-speaking and non-English-speaking children. Half of each of these groups was male and half was female.

Table 1 summarizes the relevant national/ethnic/social characteristics of the subjects, the size of the groups and their ages.

Procedures

In all three experiments the contextual factors of the conversational setting (viz., the setting, topic and social identity of the listeners) were manipulated to maximize the linguistic and functional variation elicited from each child. Each child spoke to two of eight possible puppets which differed on the dichotomous variables of age, sex and race. The two listeners for each subject differed maximally on the three variables. Thus, if a subject spoke to an old, male, white puppet s/he also addressed a puppet designated as peer, female and black. The conversations were conducted from written scripts depicting four settings, each with two topics. The settings were intended to portray a range of formality. The settings and topics used to elicit the requests were:

1.	Supermarket	a. requesting to be shown rice
		b. requesting to get ahead in the checkout line
2.	Lunch Money	a. requesting lunch money in the cafeteria
		b. requesting lunch money in the school office

Table 1. National/Ethnic/Social Backgrounds, Ages and Numbers of Subjects

	Age Range	Mean Age	N
Armenians	12;2-15;6	13;10	10
Americans	12;7-14;11	13;4	10
Latinos	7;7-11;4	9;6	32
Non-natives	7;2-9;7	8;1	8
Americans (middle class)	7;6-8;1	7;10	8
Americans (working class)	6;0-8;9	7;1	8

3.	Outside at Play	a. requesting to play in the addressee's yard
		b. requesting a ball to play with
4.	Outside Selling Cookies	a. requesting that the addressee buy some cookies
		b. requesting that the addressee sign a form

The puppets which served as listeners in the experiment, were hidden from the child until the conversation began. After the two experimenters (one male and one female) introduced themselves, the experimenter of the same sex as the child then presented a puppet matching the age, sex and race of the child. This puppet functioned as a friend who needed assistance in making requests. After a brief, spontaneous conversation (one to two minutes) the "friend" puppet initiated the first of four protocols which simulated the settings and topics listed above.

The order in which the child spoke to the two puppets was counter-balanced across the four settings. Thus, if a child spoke in the first setting to the old, male white puppet and then to the peer female black puppet and then to the peer female black puppet and then the old male white one. In addition, the order for the presentation of the four protocols was counter-balanced across subjects.

The procedures for the second experiment involving the Latino children were identical with the following exception: Each Latino child participated first in the same English version described above. Then, at a later date, the child participated in the same experiment in Spanish.

For the third experiment several important modifications were made. The settings and topics were changed to reflect only school-oriented conversations.

The new settings continued to maintain a continuum of formality, two conversations simulating more formal environments (classroom and school library) and two reflecting less formal ambience (cafeteria and playground). The entire set of topics for the requests in this experiment is listed in Table 2.

Moreover, the number of requests elicited from each child was increased to sixteen, double the number in the first two experiments. The increase in the number of requests produced by each subject tended to operate in favor of increased variation in request strategies. This same goal was prompted by increasing the number of listeners each child spoke with. The variable, race of listener, was eliminated from the design, and each child spoke to each of the four listeners (older male, younger male, older female, younger female) in all four settings. For all three groups of subjects in this experiment the procedures were conducted in English.

Data Analysis

Two aspects of language ability were examined in each of the three experiments in this study. The first analysis focused on the child's ability to vary the semantics form of his/her request strategies. The second analysis examined the child's functional ability as measured by the politeness of his/her requests.

In the first case each child's utterances were transcribed and classified as one of 14 request strategies, which were distinguished by semantic form. Then, each child was assigned a score for the number of district request strategies s/he produced. For the first two experiments the maximum score was eight. For the third study the maximum variation score was sixteen.

Table 2. Settings and Topics for Requests in Experiment Three

Setting	Topic
Classroom	a. requesting to be given a piece of paper b. requesting a pumpkin pie be made c. requesting a song be sung d. requesting that the addressee buy a ticket
Cafeteria	a. requesting to be loaned 55 cents b. requesting to cut ahead in line c. requesting some towels d. requesting two cartons of milk
Playground	a. requesting a ball to play with b. requesting to be told the word for ball in Russian c. requesting help in getting the ball d. requesting that the addressee get the nurse.
Library	a. requesting to be shown the science books b. requesting help in filling out a paper c. requesting protection from spit balls d. requesting to be told the time

In the analysis of politeness each request strategy was assigned a politeness score based on native speakers judgements elicited in an independent procedure which is described in detail in Walters (1979). A mean, based on the politeness scores for all requests produced, was computed for each child. That mean politeness score was taken as a measure of functional language ability for each child and group of children.

RESULTS

The findings concerning ability in language variation are summarized (for all three studies) in Table 3. It is important to keep in mind that the maximum variation score in Experiments I and II was eight (8) while the maximum score in the third experiment was sixteen (16).

In the first study, the one involving the oldest children, the native English speakers demonstrated a greater ability to vary their request strategies ($\bar{X}$ = 4.4) than the Armenian speakers of English did ($\bar{X}$ = 3.9) but this difference did not reach a reportable level of significance. In the Latino study, the Spanish-speaking children showed a significantly greater ability to vary requests in their first language (Spanish) than they did in their second language, English. The mean number of request strategies in Spanish was 5.1 while in their second language these same children produced a mean of 4.4 strategies ($t = -2.65$, $p < .02$). Finally, the results of the third experiment exhibited slightly higher mean variation scores for native speakers than for children whose native language was not English, but these differences were not statistically significant.

The mean politeness scores of the children's English request strategies are summarized in Table 4. In the first study native speakers ($\bar{X}$ = .451) were

Table 3. Mean scores for language variation ability by group and language of presentation (L1 vs. L2)

	Anglophones (L1) n = 10	Armenians (L2) n = 10
Experiment I	4.4	3.9
	Latinos (Spanish-L1) n = 32	Latinos (English-L2) n = 32
Experiment II	5.1	4.4
	Middle Class Anglophones (L1) n = 8	Non-native Speakers (L2) n = 8
Experiment III	4.25	3.75
	Working Class Anglophones (L1) n = 8	
	4.12	

significantly ($p < .000$) more polite than Armenian children were in English ($\bar{X} = .057$). The mean politeness score of the Latinos in English ($\bar{X} = .195$) fell near the median of all six groups but could not be compared statistically to those groups. Finally, there were no significant differences in politeness among the request strategies used by middle class anglophones, working class anglophones and non-native speakers in the third experiment.

Discussion

The overall trends in all three studies showed greater variation ability among native speakers than among second language learners. However, only in the Latino study, where the same subjects performance was compared in L1 and L2 did these differences achieve statistical significance. One possible explanation for the lack of differences between monolinguals and second language learners is that the size of the groups in Experiment I and III was too small to tease out those differences. Another possible explanation may lie in the nature of the linguistic and functional variants. That is, variation in request strategies and politeness may not be sensitive to differences between all monolingual and second language groups (Clearly they are sensitive in some instances, since Armenians were significantly less polite than their anglophone comparison group.) A third, and more attractive explanation for the lack of significant differences between bilinguals' performance in L2 and monolinguals' performance in L1 concerns the nature of this comparison.

These null results (in Experments, I and III) coupled with the significant difference of the Latinos' performance in L1 and L2, suggests that the most appropriate comparison to make is a within-group comparison. In other words the difficulties in finding a monolingual comparison group equal

Table 4. Mean politeness scores in English by group.

	Anglophones (n=10)	Armenians (n=10)
Experiment I	.451	.057
		Latinos (n = 32)
Experiment II		.195
	Middle Class Anglophones (n = 8)	Non-native Speakers (n = 8)
Experiment III	.276	.284
	Working Class Anglophones (n = 8)	
	.054	

in socioeconomic status, intelligence, etc. to the bilingual group under investigation may be insurmountable. Moreover, a comparison of first and second language skills on comparable tasks may provide greater insight into the nature of bilingualism and second language acquisition.

The finding that Armenians exhibited a significantly lower degree of politeness in their request strategies than native English speaking children of the same age may stem from several sources. It may come from the nature of their first language, Armenian. However, in breaking down the two groups in this study by sex of subject, it appeared that the males contributed more to this finding than the females. Armenian males were significantly less polite than anglophone males while the differences between females only showed a trend in that direction. Perhaps, then, the cultural trappings that Armenian males bring with them vis-a-vis politeness are more difficult to shed than those which females bring from that same culture. Since data were not available on the Armenian groups' amount of exposure to English, it is impossible to tell whether this factor contributed to their relatively lower politeness scores. Their requests, however, seemed at least as well-formed and fluent as the other two non-native groups. Therefore, it seems more likely that some inherently linguistic or cultural factor contributed to the difference in politeness.

In an effort to better understand the finding in the Latino data and the relationship between native and second language abilities, the Latino subjects were divided into two groups: balanced and non-balanced bilinguals. It was hypothesized, following Cummins (1978), that balanced bilinguals would perform better on second language tasks than non-balanced bilinguals.

This hypothesis was based on Cummins' (1978) contention that "competence in a second language (L2) is partially a function of the type of competence already developed in L1 at the time when intensive exposure to L2 begins." It follows from this that greater ability in one's native language ought to produce greater ability in a second language than more limited native language skills would. (It is also clear that the age of second language onset must have a tremendous influence on performance although this is not directly relevant to the present study.)

For this analysis subjects were assigned either to the balanced bilingual group or the non-balanced group based on their performance on Spanish and English versions of the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (Dunn, 1959). Any child whose raw scores on the two tests did not show a difference of more than eight items (i.e., the Spanish (English) score minus the English (Spanish) scores was less than or equal to eight) was assigned to the balanced group. The number of subjects in this group totaled fifteen. Children whose Spanish Peabody score exceeded their English score (or vice-versa) by more than eight were assigned to the non-balanced group. Seventeen children were classified as non-balanced bilinguals. No significant differences existed between balanced and non-balanced bilinguals with respect to age and sex.

The results of this analysis corroborated the hypothesis. Balanced bilinguals varied their requests strategies significantly more than the non-balanced group did. The mean number of request strategies used by the balanced group was 4.93 while the mean number used by the non-balanced group was 3.88 ($t = 5.42$, $df = (1,30)$, $p < .03$). This result substantiates the facts that bilinguals do not represent a homogeneous group and that the notion

of balanced versus non-balanced may be an effective tool for classification. More important, however, the finding lends support to the hypothesis that a relationship exists between a bilingual's two languages and that relationship affects performance in the second language.

A further examination of the balanced and non-balanced group's performance shows a trend ($t = 3.1$, $p = .089$) toward a greater degree of politeness among the non-balanced group. Their mean politeness score was .286; the mean for balanced bilinguals was .104. (The relatively high standard deviation for the mean of the non-balanced group, indicative of a lack of homogenuity in that group's performance, may have prevented this difference from achieving a level of statistical significance.) The higher mean politeness score in the non-balanced bilinguals suggests that these children may have used more polite requests as a means of compensating for their more limited ability in varying their request strategies.

This line of research, which examines language variation ability and the ability to function politely, and the findings presented have two implications for bilingual education programs. First, the balanced-non-balanced distinction may provide a more appropriate tool for the assessment of children in bilingual programs than the criterion that a child be English dominant or Spanish dominant. The non-balanced group in this study included some children from each of those two categories. The findings of this study would seem to indicate that balanced bilingualism may represent a better criterion than English-dominance in the decision to send a child to an English-medium curriculum. Research in other settings (Balkan, 1970; Cummings and Gulutsan, 1974) lend further support to this approach, since non-balanced bilinguals performed poorer than monolinguals in those studies. Thus, sending a

non-balanced bilingual to an English-medium program may place that child at a disadvantage with respect to his/her monolingual peers.

A second important implication of this research centers on the linguistic and functional information elicited from the child. It focuses on language variation and the ability to use language for a social purpose (i.e., politeness). It falls short, however, in that it fails to get a handle on the assessment of language skills which would be contextually appropriate. Future research will attempt to look at the appropriateness of the politeness level as a function of setting, topic and listener.

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